

## The Onslaught of Burke

Edmund Burke was born in Dublin in January 1729 and baptized into the Church of England. His mother and many of his relations were Catholics and there is some reason to believe that his father Richard Burke became an Anglican only because he would not otherwise have been permitted to practise as an attorney. Even so, Edmund Burke received a Protestant education, being sent to a school kept by a Quaker in 1741 and to Trinity College, Dublin, in 1744, where he stayed for four years and left with a BA degree. In 1750 he went to London to read for the Bar, but was never called to it.

It is not known how he spent his early years in London. In 1756, he published two books, one of them a contribution to aesthetics which retains a place in the history of the subject. At some time during the winter of 1756-7 he married Jane Nugent. There is a tradition that they underwent a Catholic ceremony in Paris, but there seems to be no evidence to support it, beyond the fact that Jane's father was a Catholic. They had two sons, one who died in childhood and another, Richard, born in 1758, who followed his father into politics but died young in 1794, to the great grief of his father who outlived him by three years.

Burke started to earn a regular income in 1758-9 by undertaking the production of the *Annual Register*, a practice which he continued for thirty years. From 1759 to 1765 he acted as secretary to William Gerald Hamilton, during which time Hamilton himself became chief secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and after breaking with Hamilton, Burke found a patron in the newly appointed Prime Minister, the second Marquis of Rockingham, for whom he acted as private secretary. His friendship with Rockingham, who assisted him financially, lasted until Rockingham's death in 1782.

Burke was first elected to Parliament in 1765 as a nominee of Lord Verney's for the borough of Wendover. He naturally supported the Rockingham Whig administration and followed it into opposition in 1766. He could not afford and never succeeded in affording the Buckinghamshire estate, at Beaconsfield, which he bought in 1768, though he was helped by his appointment in 1771 as London agent to the State of New York at a salary of £500. This was the year in which he published *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, perhaps the best known of his political pamphlets.

In the parliamentary election of 1774 Burke was both elected a member for Bristol and nominated by Lord Rockingham to the borough of Malton. He chose to represent Bristol, after enunciating the principle that a parliamentary representative should not subordinate his judgement to the opinions of his constituents. I think that this is an excellent principle, so far as it relates to such questions as capital or corporal punishment, or the toleration of homosexuality, or abortion. On the other hand, I think that a member should at least offer himself for re-election if he thoroughly repudiates the purely political programme on the strength of which he was elected. This is not to say that a back-bencher is committed to supporting his party on every particular issue.

For all its merits, Burke's principle may have led him to take rather a loose view of representative government. He never showed any qualms about sitting for a rotten borough. When the electors of Bristol rejected him in 1780, he was content to accept Rockingham's offer and remained a member for Malton until his retirement from Parliament in 1794. This may seem inconsistent with his endorsing the colonists' slogan of 'No taxation without representation' when he allied himself with Charles James Fox in 1774, in opposition to Lord North's American policy, but I have been convinced by Conor Cruise O'Brien, to whose introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* I am very much indebted, that Burke was chiefly moved by what he saw as the similarity between the situation of the American colonists and that of the Irish Catholics. He had no such motive for sympathizing with French Republicans.

Karl Marx was later to accuse Burke of being bribed first by the colonists to support their cause and then by the English oligarchy to attack the French Revolution. So far as I know, there is no evidence for the first charge and I doubt the second, in spite of his joining Pitt's government in 1792 and Paine's allegation that he was enabled by Pitt to take out a pension of £1,500 a year in someone else's name. He

was awarded a civil list pension of £125 a year in 1795, but I believe that his hostility to the French Revolution was genuine, and that his disagreement with the Whigs over this question widened a breach which had already been caused by his feeling that they had not treated him fairly. He was made Paymaster of the Forces by Rockingham in 1782 and held the same office under the Duke of Portland in 1783, the year following Rockingham's death, but in neither case was he included in the Cabinet. Nor, in spite of their long association, did Fox intend to appoint Burke to any higher office when he expected to form a government in 1788.

By that time Burke was busy conducting the impeachment of Warren Hastings on the charge of his tyrannical misconduct as Governor of Bengal. The case dragged on till 1795, when Hastings was acquitted, in spite of Burke's eloquence, which cannot be gainsaid, whatever view one takes of his political judgement.

Burke was a prominent and early member of the Literary Club, founded by Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1764, and made famous by Boswell in his *Life of Samuel Johnson*. Dr Johnson's tribute to Burke's powers of conversation is well known:

*Boswell* Mr Burke has a constant stream of conversation.  
*Johnson* Yes, Sir, if a man were to go by chance at the same time with Burke under a shed to shun a shower, he would say – 'This is an extraordinary man'. If Burke should go into a stable to see his horse drest, the ostler would say – 'We have had an extraordinary man here'.

A little later, however, he allowed Burke's conversation to be very superior so long as he 'does not descend to be merry', an opinion not shared by Boswell, who admired Burke's 'pleasantry', though he did not venture to say so at the time. An earlier tribute of Johnson's, also quoted in Boswell's *Life*, is less equivocal. 'Burke is the only man whose conversation corresponds with the general fame which he has in the world. Take up whatever topick you please, he is ready to meet you.'

Burke made his first public attack on the French Revolution in a speech which he delivered in the House of Commons on 8 February 1790. It was his contribution to a debate on the Army Estimates and the burden of his speech was that the French 'distemper' must not be allowed to spread to England. He said that he felt so strongly opposed not only to the end of democracy, on the French pattern, but to the means by which it was then being introduced, that if any of his friends

showed the least tendency to imitate these means, he would abandon them and join his worst enemies.

These remarks were directed primarily against Fox, who had recently announced in Parliament that he 'exulted' in the French Revolution 'from feelings and from principle'. Even Pitt referred to it in favourable terms. Pitt was soon to make it clear that, whether or not the Revolution suited the French, he did not regard it as an article of export. On the other hand Fox supported the French Revolution in all its vicissitudes and even transferred his sympathy to Napoleon. This was true of many English Radicals, including radical writers like Byron and Shelley. They contrasted the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity which Napoleon had spread throughout Europe, admittedly by force of arms, but arms used to weaken the tyrannical governments of Austria and Prussia, with the odious, arbitrary, repressive policies of Pitt and his successors.

I met Murder on the way –  
He had a mask like Castlereagh.<sup>1</sup>

Burke's estrangement from Fox and Fox's Whig associates did not greatly endear him to the Tories. In their drunken fashion, they applauded his oratory, but they never took him to their hearts even after they included him in their councils. Politically, until the end of his life, he remained a rather isolated figure. His reputation as a profound political theorist, as one who had already supplied the answer to John Stuart Mill's characterization of the Conservatives as 'the stupid party', is almost entirely a twentieth-century development. It is mainly based on his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Let us see whether this work deserves the construction which has been put upon it.

Rather awkwardly, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is cast in the form of a reply to a letter written to Burke from Paris in November 1789 by a young Frenchman called Chames-Jean-François de Pont. Burke had already sent a relatively brief answer before the close of 1789 and his *Reflections* express the conclusions at which he had arrived in the light of further information and more concentrated thought. He began work on the book early in 1790 and published it in November of that year. It runs to nearly two hundred pages in the Penguin Classics edition but since it masquerades as a letter, it is not divided into chapters. The result is not easily digestible, like an old-fashioned

<sup>1</sup> Shelley, *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819).

Christmas pudding, with a few sixpences buried in it for the benefit of the children. The task of the critic is to find the sixpennyworths of theory and extract them from the pudding. The pudding is rhetoric, of which Burke was a master.

The motive for Burke's diatribe, ostensibly, and probably also in fact, was a meeting of a group called the Revolution Society, founded in 1788 to commemorate the Glorious Whig Revolution of which that year was the centenary. The proceedings included a sermon by a well-known dissenting Minister, Dr Richard Price, which the Society published, together with a congratulatory address to the French National Assembly. Burke was committed to approving of the deposition of the English King James II in favour of William and Mary, and therefore to discounting any show of similarity between the two 'revolutions'. In particular, he had to argue that neither was justified merely by the fact that they resulted in an increase of popular liberty. 'I should,' he writes

suspend my congratulations on the new liberty of France, until I was informed how it had been combined with government; with public force; with the discipline and obedience of armies; with the collection of an effective and well-distributed revenue; with morality and religion; with the solidity of property; with peace and order: with civil and social manners. All these (in their way) are good things too; and, without them, liberty is not a benefit whilst it lasts, and is not likely to continue long.<sup>1</sup>

A considerable part of Burke's discourse is devoted to showing that in the case of France these further conditions have not been satisfied.

In the course of his sermon Dr Price asserted that through the Revolution of 1688 the people of England had acquired three fundamental rights, namely '1. "To choose our own governors." 2. "To cashier them for misconduct." 3. "To frame a government for ourselves."' Burke flatly denies that any such rights have been acquired. Not only that but he denies just as strongly that any belief in their enjoyment of such a bill of rights is held by 'the body of the people of England'. 'They utterly disclaim it. They will resist the practical assertion of it with their lives and fortunes. They are bound to do so by the laws of their country, made at the time of that very Revolution, which is appealed to in favour of the fictitious rights claimed by the society which abuses its name.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Penguin Classics, pp. 90-91.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 99.

It seems to me that this is an idle dispute. In the first place, who are our governors? Probably, in the context, our monarchs. Do we choose them? Not since 1688. Or possibly not since 1714, since George I could be said to have been chosen, though he had an hereditary claim. This does not apply to all countries. Lord Rothermere was offered the throne of Hungary after the First World War, though he had the good sense to refuse it. In any case, it is unfair to take the argument into the twentieth century, especially the latter part of it when there are very few monarchs left, and they govern to a very limited extent. But what about dictators? Was Mussolini chosen by the people of Italy? Hardly. He marched on Rome and met with no serious resistance. Was Hitler chosen by the Germans? A more difficult question. His party never won a majority at a general election, but there was a period when most Germans at least appear to have supported him, many of them with great enthusiasm. As a general rule, dictators are not chosen by any but a very small body of persons: they usurp power.

Two rulers who are neither monarchs nor dictators but something between the two can most fairly be said to be popular choices. They are the President of the United States and, under its new constitution, the President of France. They are not unanimously chosen, but it is not to be supposed that even Dr Price intended that his 'governors' should be. Neither is it pertinent, however interesting, that the proportion of registered voters who actually cast their votes in Presidential elections in the United States does not normally exceed fifty per cent. Their right is not abolished by the fact that they do not bother to exercise it.

Do we have the right to cashier our governors, and now let this include not only monarchs, but dictators and presidents? Did Mr Baldwin have the right to prevent King Edward from marrying Mrs Simpson and so engineer his abdication? Did the American Senate have the right to force President Nixon to resign his office by threatening to impeach him on account of his part in the Watergate scandal? I suppose that the answer is yes in both cases. The American Senate kept within the bounds of the American Constitution. By now it is taken for granted that an English monarch has no legitimate authority if he or she is denied the services of a ministry in the House of Commons. But what of the body of the people? They hardly come into it. Perhaps neither Mr Baldwin nor the American senators could have acted as they did if King Edward or Mr Nixon manifestly commanded great popular support. But they did not. There may just have been a balance of sympathy for Edward. 'Hark the herald angels sing, Mrs

Simpson's pinched our king,' sang the children in the streets. And that was that.

Let us not now go further into the question of representative democracy. The recent history of England shows how small a percentage of electoral support is needed to keep a government in power. This does not prevent it from being a legitimate government, according to our electoral system. The system may seem irrational and just missed being altered in 1931. At present the body of the people has not only the right but even, indirectly, the power to change it. As yet, it has shown no strong disposition to do so.

Does the body of the people ever effect a revolution? I cannot think of a straightforward example. Not the French Revolution, which was far from commanding universal support throughout the French provinces, though a body of people, the Parisians, did contribute very largely to it. Not either of the two Russian revolutions in 1917, in which the peasants had no say, though Lenin and Trotsky took advantage of the widespread desire for Russia's withdrawal from the war. Not the Cuban Revolution, which Castro initiated with a handful of followers, though again he profited by the fact that he was overthrowing an unpopular dictatorship. Perhaps the American Revolution is as close an example as any, if slaves are not counted as people, though, as we have seen, it was slow in coming to a head and dominated by what amounted to an oligarchy.

What does quite often happen is that a monarch or a dictator or a group of usurpers surrender their position when they discover, not necessarily that they are disliked by the body of the people, but that they can no longer rely on the loyalty or strength of their supporters. This became a frequent occurrence in the Roman Empire, when the Emperor's surrender of power might take the form of his suicide or assassination. A good modern example would be that of the Greek Colonels, who were in fact unable to withstand the pressure of popular hostility, though it has to be added that they might have stood their ground if they had not also alienated foreign opinion. I hope that the same will be true of the present governments of South Africa and of General Pinochet in Chile.

If I were a citizen of Chile and had the opportunity of organizing a successful coup against General Pinochet, should I ask myself whether I had the right to do so? The question would not occur to me. What would occupy me would be the question whether I had the power. Hobbes may have gone too far with his famous saying 'Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words, and of no strength to secure a man

at all.<sup>1</sup> Many men keep their covenants out of a sense of moral obligation. Even so, at least at the national level, there is always a background of authority. The fundamental question in politics, as Lenin put it, remains 'Who - Whom?'

This is not an attempt to divorce politics from morality. For instance, one of the merits of the United States is the moral surveillance to which its rulers are subjected, making it difficult and perilous for them to overstep the bounds of constitutional propriety. A less welcome product of the same tendency is the belief, I think unquestioningly held, by members of the administration and an increasing number of its citizens that the United States has not only the right but the duty to check the advance of what it chooses to regard as Communism, wherever it appears in the world, without being very scrupulous either about the means or the results. How far economic interests foster this belief and profit by it is a question into which I am not equipped to enter.

I fear that I have strayed a long way from Burke. But perhaps not quite so far as it may seem, since he paid great attention to the concept of legitimacy. What may seem strange is the very great importance that he attached to the factor of heredity. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 is made less revolutionary by Mary's being a daughter of James II. The Hanoverian intrusion is legitimized by the fact that George I was descended from the Stuarts through the Princess Sophia. 'No experience has taught us,' says Burke, 'that in any other course or method than that of an *hereditary crown*, our liberties can be regularly perpetuated and preserved sacred as our *hereditary right*.'<sup>2</sup> Again,

In the famous law of the 3rd of Charles I, called the *Petition of Right*, the parliament says to the king, 'your subjects have *inherited* this freedom,' claiming their franchises not on abstract principles 'as the rights of men,' but as the rights of Englishmen, and as patrimony derived from their forefathers.<sup>3</sup>

And more generally:

You will observe, that from Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right, it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties, as an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our

<sup>1</sup> *Leviathan*, ch. XVII.

<sup>2</sup> *Reflections on the Revolution*, p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 118.

forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity; as an 'estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right. By this means our constitution preserves an unity in so great a diversity of its parts. We have an inheritable crown; an inheritable peerage; and an house of commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties, from a long line of ancestors.'<sup>1</sup>

Burke's emphasis on heredity goes together with his reverence for property, since it is the common practice that property is transmitted by inheritance. He admits that the possession of ability as well as property should figure in the representation of a State but goes on to argue that property should predominate 'out of all proportion', on the extraordinary ground that property needs to be protected from ability which is 'a vigorous and active principle' whereas 'property is sluggish, inert, and timid'. This is followed by his saying that 'the characteristic essence of property . . . is to be *unequal*.'<sup>2</sup> No doubt it is, but one reason why it is is that those who chiefly busy themselves with the acquisition and retention of property, so far from being sluggish, inert, and timid are energetic, active and sometimes bold to the point of lacking scruple. Above all they are tenacious. In fact Burke's contrasting of ability with property is a false antithesis. It may be that some owners of large property at the time that he was writing had become inert, because their interests were not seriously threatened, but if they had become inert the mere fact that they owned property should not have qualified them for office. I rather fear that Burke thought that it should, especially if the property had been passed down to them through several generations.

But how can Burke have come to hold such a belief? He was a very intelligent man and it must have been obvious to him that no right can be founded on heredity alone. There must have been some title to it in the first place, otherwise there would be nothing to inherit. In the case of government, what did he suppose this title to be?

The two sensible answers that he gives are that 'Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human *wants*,'<sup>3</sup> and that 'all just governments owe their birth' to and 'justify their continuance' on 'principles of cogent expediency'.<sup>4</sup> I said that these answers were

<sup>1</sup> *Reflections on the Revolution*, p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 276.

sensible but they are also very vague. Human wants vary in different societies and at different stages of a society's development. What is expedient in one set of circumstances will not be in another. Burke, indeed, would have been the last to deny these platitudes. His appeal to Conservatives chiefly consists in the precept, which they extract from his writings, that one should proceed cautiously, preserving and reforming, in the light of what exists, and how it will be variously affected, rather than risk causing havoc by the indiscriminate application of however seductive a moral principle. Nevertheless, Burke's reference to 'principles of cogent expediency' surely does commit him to a rather more positive theory of some degree of generality.

I believe that there is one passage of the *Reflections* in which this theory is set out. It is a very long passage and, typically, not divided into paragraphs. The passion with which it cleaves to what emerges almost as a religious doctrine has induced me to overcome my hesitation over quoting it in full:

Society is indeed a contract. Subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest may be dissolved at pleasure – but the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, callico or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with other reverence; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primaevial contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place. This law is not subject to the will of those, who by an obligation above them, and infinitely superior, are bound to submit their will to that law. The municipal corporations of that universal kingdom are not morally at liberty at their pleasure, and on their speculations of a contingent improvement, wholly to separate and tear asunder the

bands of their subordinate community, and to dissolve it into an unsocial, uncivil, unconnected chaos of elementary principles. It is the first and supreme necessity only, a necessity that is not chosen but chooses, a necessity paramount to deliberation, that admits no discussion, and demands no evidence, which alone can justify a resort to anarchy. This necessity is no exception to the rule; because this necessity itself is a part too of that moral and physical disposition of things to which man must be obedient by consent or force; but if that which is only submission to necessity should be made the object of choice, the law is broken, nature is disobeyed, and the rebellious are outlawed, cast forth, and exiled, from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow.<sup>1</sup>

This is a fine piece of prose, if one cares for rhetoric, but what does it all mean? What is the great primaëval contract of eternal society and who are the parties to it? What is the inviolable oath which holds all physical natures in their appointed places? What is the first and supreme necessity which alone can justify a resort to anarchy: a necessity of which it is first said that it is not chosen, and then, inconsistently, that it can be chosen but only with the direst consequences?

I have no answer to the last question, beyond the conjecture that the necessity might consist in the utter breakdown of civilization, as a result perhaps of something like a widespread plague. This would fail to explain, however, why it should be called 'first and supreme' or why anyone should want to choose it. A reply to the second point might be that what is chosen is not the necessity but the anarchy, unforeseen by the chooser, to which it leads: a reply to the first that the necessity, if it came about, would have been pre-ordained.

This last conjecture is admittedly far-fetched. I think, however, that it does supply us with a clue to the way in which our other questions should be answered. Remembering that Burke was very religious, I suggest that the parties to the great primaëval contract and the inviolable oath were meant to be God and Man. What Burke is maintaining is that an upheaval like the French Revolution runs counter to the natural order, itself divinely appointed. An obvious comment is that this would not be possible, since there is no such thing as an unnatural event, any more than there could be a violation of an

<sup>1</sup> *Reflections on the Revolution*, pp. 194-5.

inviolable oath. Anything that happens, however bizarre, is part of the course of nature. It is, however, quite common in moral and political philosophy to find the word 'natural' used normatively, to imply not that the event in question never does occur but that it should not be permitted to, and clearly this is the sense in which Burke is using it here. I presume that he also allows it to be possible for men to misuse the freedom which God has granted them so far as to pervert the social, if not the physical, order which he has organized, though they are bound to suffer in consequence.

But why should the social order be hierarchical? Again I can find no satisfactory answer, though there is plenty of evidence in the *Reflections* that Burke thought it had to be. Two passages, in particular, seem to me decisive. They have the greater weight in so far as they do not sustain the implications of Burke's intemperate reference, so often quoted against him, to 'the swinish multitude'.

The first of these passages occurs at a point where Burke is defending the 'useless' life of monks. 'They are,' he says,

as usefully employed as if they worked from dawn to dark, in the innumerable servile, degrading, unseemly, unmanly, and often most unwholesome and pestiferous occupations, to which by the social economy so many wretches are inevitably doomed. If it were not generally pernicious to disturb the natural course of things, and to impede, in any degree, the great wheel of circulation which is turned by the strangely directed labour of these unhappy people, I should be infinitely more inclined forcibly to rescue them from their miserable industry, than violently to disturb the tranquil repose of monastic quietude.<sup>1</sup>

Why then does he not attempt to rescue these victims of society? Why does he tolerate the conditions that force them to be 'swinish'? The answer he gives is 'the necessity of submitting to the yoke of luxury, and the despotism of fancy, who in their own imperious way will distribute the surplus product of the soil'.<sup>2</sup> But what could conceivably be the ground of the necessity? The answer appears in a previous paragraph. 'In every prosperous community something more is produced than goes to the immediate support of the producer. This surplus forms the income of the landed capitalist. It will be spent by a proprietor who does not labour. But this idleness is itself the spring of labour; this repose the spur to industry.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 270.

What a surprising foretaste of Karl Marx! Only for 'Marx the appropriation of 'surplus value' was an evil to be abolished. In fairness to Burke, it should be added that he does recommend that 'the capital taken in rent from the land, should be returned again to the industry from whence it came; and that its expenditure should be with the least possible detriment to the morals of those who expend it, and to those of the people to whom it is returned.'<sup>1</sup>

What is more, he even refers to this as 'the concern of the state'. At the same time he does not pretend that it actually happens or suggest any way in which the state might effectively display its concern. It would rather seem that he takes 'the yoke of luxury and the despotism of fancy' to be ingredients in the natural order.

My second passage comes towards the end of the book:

To keep a balance between the power of acquisition on the part of the subject, and the demands he is to answer on the part of the state, is a fundamental part of the skill of a true politician. The means of acquisition are prior in time and in arrangement. Good order is the foundation of all good things. To be enabled to acquire, the people, without being servile, must be tractable and obedient. The magistrate must have his reverence, the laws their authority. The body of the people must not find the principles of natural subordination by art rooted out of their minds. They must respect that property of which they cannot partake. They must labour to obtain what by labour can be obtained; and when they find, as they commonly do, the success disproportioned to the endeavour, they must be taught their consolation in the final proportions of eternal justice. Of this consolation, whoever deprives them, deadens their industry, and strikes at the root of all acquisition as of all conservation. He that does this is the cruel oppressor, the merciless enemy of the poor and wretched; at the same time that by his wicked speculations he exposes the fruits of successful industry, and the accumulations of fortune, to the plunder of the negligent, the disappointed, and the unprosperous.<sup>2</sup>

What, I wonder, are 'the final proportions of eternal justice' that are to console the wretches, whom Burke pities, for their misfortunes? I thought at first that he was locating them in an after-life, but how in that case could Burke's villains deprive them of them? Perhaps by

<sup>1</sup> *Reflections on the Revolution*, pp. 194-5.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 372.

undermining their religious beliefs, but why should the loss of religious belief on the part of the unfortunate lead to the outrages which he then proceeds to list? I think that there is a way of making the argument coherent. We are to suppose that the recompense in the world to come for those who have not prospered on earth is not offered unconditionally: it will be a consolation only for those whose success has not been proportionate to their endeavours; those whom Shaw's Alfred Dolittle called 'the undeserving poor' will be given no benefits. But now suppose that 'wicked' men persuade even the deserving poor that their religious beliefs are false. They have nothing to look forward to beyond what they can achieve in this world. Will they not consider it unjust that they languish in poverty however hard they work? And will not the result be that, if they are given the opportunity, they will strip the 'accumulator' of his fortune, especially if he has done nothing to earn it?

I think that I have succeeded in putting the best construction on Burke's argument, in so far as I have made it coherent: this is not to say that I have made it convincing. If one is going to talk about 'eternal justice' why should it not operate in this world? And if the answer be that it does operate in this world why should it entail such huge measures of inequality? 'The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly, and ordered their estate.' Does it really come down to that? Can Burke's political philosophy be captured in a quatrain of Cecil Frances Alexander's children's hymn? We have perhaps to add the rider that it is possible but at the best foolhardy to tamper with what God has ordered.

It would, however, be unfair to Burke to expose the thinness of his political philosophy, when stripped of its layer of rhetoric, and fail to acknowledge his political acumen. In criticizing his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* we need to bear in mind the year in which it was written, 1790, a year of comparative tranquillity in Paris, three years before the outbreak of the Reign of Terror. Burke devotes several eloquent pages to the plight of Marie-Antoinette on 6 October 1789, when she was compelled with her husband to forsake Versailles for Paris, taunted all along the way by a mob of women and of men disguised as women in a procession headed by two of her murdered guards with their heads on spikes. What would he have found to say if he had been writing after she and Louis had been guillotined in 1793, with their son the Dauphin left to die in prison? He did not predict their execution but he did predict that Louis XVI who still retained his office after he had been brought back to Paris was already in a position where

he could exercise so little power that he might just as well have been deposed.

A fact which Burke did foresee is that once the three Orders of the States General of France, the Nobility, the Clergy and the Third Estate, ceased to act separately, each having an equal voice in the decisions that were taken, but were merged into a single National Assembly, the Third Estate, though its six hundred representatives were not more numerous than the sum of the other two, would dominate the proceedings. One reason for this was that the representatives of the nobility and the clergy were not united in their views. This was especially true of the clergy, a large proportion of whom were country curates who were not only unfitted for their responsibility as legislators by having no experience of public affairs beyond the narrow concerns of their small parishes, but were also jealous of their ecclesiastical superiors, many of whom enjoyed an immensely higher standard of living than they could ever aspire to. The members of the nobility were more strongly disposed to act in concert, but there were those among them whose loyalty to their own order succumbed to the temptation of improving their position within it by coming forward as champions of the people. In this instance, Burke failed to do justice to noblemen like the Comte de Mirabeau who acted not primarily out of self-interest but rather in accordance with his belief that the established order in France had palpable defects which he was in a favourable position to attempt to remedy.

Though he did not predict that the Third Estate would tear itself to pieces, but rather assumed that it would continue to act homogeneously, Burke expressed a shrewd criticism of the selection of its representatives. Noting that a great proportion of them were lawyers, he went on to remark that for the most part they were not 'distinguished magistrates' or 'leading advocates' or 'renowned professors of universities' but 'obscure provincial advocates' and their like whose practices lay 'in the petty war of village vexation'.<sup>1</sup> Such men could outmanoeuvre the farmers, traders and even doctors of medicine who were their colleagues in the Third Estate but they had neither the experience nor the intellectual equipment to serve the best interests of the nation.

I think that this criticism was not altogether wide of the mark. It would, indeed, be absurd to contend that such a man as Robespierre was lacking in ability, but his attitude was legalistic and it was his inflexibility, shared by his enemies and his associates, that brought discord to the National Assembly, and supplied the guillotine with its victims, including himself.

<sup>1</sup> *Reflections on the Revolution*, pp. 129-30.

Where it seems to me that Burke went astray was in underrating the sincerity if not of all the representatives of the Third Estate, at least of the leaders of its several factions. A group of petty attorneys would have resorted to compromise; they would have been content with the pickings that their elevation made available to them. Whatever their origins, such men as Danton, Robespierre and Desmoulins believed in their mission to reform the constitution of France. They died for their principles.

The most striking proof of Burke's political prescience was his foretelling the emergence not of Napoleon personally, of whom he would not have heard in 1790, but of someone who would play Napoleon's part. 'Some popular general,' he wrote:

who understands the art of conciliating the soldiery, and who possesses the true spirit of command, shall draw the eyes of all men upon himself. Armies will obey him on his personal account. There is no other way of securing military obedience in this state of things. But the moment in which that event shall happen, the person who really commands the army is your master; the master (that is little) of your king, the master of your assembly, the master of your whole republic.<sup>1</sup>

Have we at last found the explanation, other than the absence of plausible competitors, for the homage paid to Burke as a standard-bearer of Conservatism? What is required is the flair for predicting the immediate course of events. One need not then probe very far into political philosophy. The danger here, however, is that of saddling Burke with Hegel. For all his reverence for ancient institutions, Burke did not equate the real with the rational; he did not believe that whatever is is right. We should remember also, first that the theory that democracy leads to dictatorship goes as far back as Plato and Aristotle; secondly that Burke was primarily a Whig who never was entrusted by his party with any high political office.

<sup>1</sup> *ibid.*, p. 342.